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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the classroom participation and communication of language minority students with severe disabilities can be facilitated through the use of many methods based on principles of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. The specific method described include: (1) total physical response, (2) the natural approach, (3) cooperative learning, (4) preview/review method, (4) and making use of cultural information. Suggestions for applying each of the methods to students with severe disabilities are offered and examples are given. (Contains 25 references or suggested resources.) (DB)

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Effective Communication Programming for Language Minority Students with Severe Disabilities

by
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By the year 2000 there will be increasingly greater numbers of language minority students enrolled in regular as well as special education classes. Already, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reports that growing numbers of minority children and youth are being placed in classes for students with severe disabilities. Teachers in both regular and special education will need to find ways to meet the communication and other educational needs of language minority students with severe disabilities. Many of the teachers in special education will need to learn how to utilize a variety of approaches used in English as a second language (ESL) instruction in order to address the needs of their language minority students with disabilities.

This paper provides information on how the classroom participation and communication of language minority students with severe disabilities can be facilitated and improved through the use of many English as a second language (ESL) methods.[1] These methods are described in this paper, as is research investigating how teachers have effectively used these methods with language minority students with severe disabilities. In order to illustrate how ESL methods have been successfully adapted to the needs of language minority students with severe disabilities, several anecdotal examples are also provided.

From the time language minority children with severe disabilities are born until they become adults, many hear, speak, and receive direct information only in their home or first language (L1). Consequently, they may develop only a limited proficiency in English or have no English proficiency at all. When such students are taught only in English, they often do not know how to respond to what the teacher is asking them to do. To further compound the problem, teachers may be unaware that their students' lack of response or apparent confusion is due to the fact that the students do not understand English. Communication problems are even greater for those language minority students who are unable to speak because of their disability. Not only do these students not understand what is being said to them, they are unable to tell the teacher or other careproviders that they do not understand.

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Cummins (1980) notes that it takes from two to three years for language minority students to be able to use the second language (L2) effectively in interpersonal communication. Five to seven years of study are usually necessary before language minority students can use the L2 for academic purposes, such as what is typically required in the classroom. Language minority students who also have severe disabilities may take even longer periods of time to learn to use the L2 for either interpersonal or school-related purposes.

Teachers will find it useful to know that several methods commonly used in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms have been used effectively with language minority students who have severe disabilities. These methods have proven useful in helping teachers to communicate with their students and have helped the students to communicate with their teachers. The ESL methods, which are described below, allow students to make use of all of their senses as they learn the second language. Incorporating the students' home culture into instruction can also be an important factor in motivating students to learn the second language.

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A Description of ESL Methods

There is a paucity of literature in the area of how to assist language minority students with severe disabilities to communicate as well as to speak or be verbal. Writers such as Baca (1984), Chinn (1984), and Ortiz and Ramirez (1989) have noted that educational preparation and inservice training of teachers and other careproviders of language minority students need to include bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) methods, as well as information about working with culturally diverse populations. This section of the paper reviews and describes five methodologies common to ESL classrooms, all of which have relevance for teachers working with language minority students with severe disabilities.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

The approach known as Total Physical Response (TPR) has been used successfully with students who are learning a second language (Asher, 1988). When TPR is used in a classroom where students are learning English, the teacher gives students commands in English. The teacher gestures, models, and says the commands to the students, and students respond by imitating the teacher. The children intently watch the teacher's every move and listen to the accompanying command. For example, the teacher may say, "Open the window," at the same time performing the action. The students imitate the teacher. Slowly they begin to comprehend the various words, actions, and

commands that the teacher is modeling and having them repeat. Students are not required to speak initially, but as speech emerges, students begin to give commands themselves. The theory behind this approach is that a second language is best learned in the same manner and sequence as children learn their first language.

Asher (1988) notes that students actively listening to commands given in English will need ten hours or more to begin processing the second language (L2). More time may go by before the student begins speaking the L2. Asher (1988) also notes that some students listen more slowly; these students will take even longer to begin comprehending and speaking the second language. This longer time period may be the case for language minority students with severe disabilities. Durán and Shunk (1992), working directly with such students, note that they may indeed take longer than ten hours to begin comprehending the second language and even longer to begin speaking the L2. Durán and Shunk have observed that some language minority students with severe disabilities take up to six months to begin responding and verbally communicating in the second language. With other students, they note it may even take longer, particularly if students have interfering behaviors, which often prevent language instruction from taking place.

The Natural Approach

Another approach that has been used successfully with students enrolled in ESL classrooms is the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In the Natural Approach, use of the second language for meaningful communication is stressed, with the main goal being to develop students' ability to communicate orally and in writing. The teacher typically provides a great deal of input in English; this input is linguistically just slightly above the students' current level of proficiency (Krashen and Terrell call this "comprehensible input").

Classroom activities should have a purpose other than conscious learning and practicing of grammatical points. Topics of these activities should be interesting or meaningful to students, so that student attention is focused on the *content* of what is being said in English, rather than on the English forms themselves. Using the Natural Approach, then, the teacher might have students role play meeting each other for the first time.

Often students go through several stages in acquiring a second language. Students may initially go through a silent period, concentrating on building a knowledge base of L2 words through listening to their teacher's comprehensible input. In the Natural Approach, this silent period is accepted by teachers; students are not pressed to speak until they are ready. When students do begin to speak, they often use one or two words to respond to questions and to communicate ideas. Errors are usually not corrected; rather, it is assumed that students will eventually correct their own errors as they are exposed to more input.

Cooperative Learning

Another approach that comes to us from ESL classrooms is cooperative learning (Kagan, 1985). Typically, in ESL cooperative learning situations, pairs or small groups of students work together to practice drills, gather or pool information, solve a problem, check each other's work, or complete a project. Cooperative learning provides rich communication opportunities for limited English proficient students. In ESL classrooms, *how* students are paired is important: A student who is more proficient in English is generally teamed up with a student who has less proficiency. Pairing students with different native languages may also be important, because then the students will need to use English to communicate with each other. However, in many ESL classrooms, use of the L1 is permitted in cooperative grouping as a means of facilitating student discussion and learning of concepts; English is then used when the groups report their activities and findings to the whole class.

A teacher working with students who have severe disabilities can make use of the cooperative learning approach, modifying it to the needs and capabilities of the students. How to make such modifications to the cooperative learning approach is discussed in the next section of this paper.

Preview/Review Method

Another method from English as a second language instruction which is useful in teaching language minority students with severe disabilities is the Preview/Review method (Jacobson, 1987).

In Preview-Review, content areas are previewed in student's native language (L1), then presented in English (L2), and finally reviewed in L1. This method may be especially useful in the upper primary and secondary levels, where content materials (e.g., science or social studies textbooks) may not be readily available in minority languages.

When utilizing the Preview/Review approach, it is important that only a few words, phrases, or sentences be given initially to students in their native language. If the teacher uses more than a few words or sentences in the students' native language, then students wait for their first language and do not make an effort to understand the lesson when it is presented in English.

Making Use of Cultural Information

ESL classrooms are, by nature, filled with students of cultures different from the U.S. culture. Students often experience difficulty in adjusting to the new culture, which can translate into resistance to learning the new language. Asher (1988) and Cummins (1980) note the importance of helping language minority students learn language through the teacher making use of the student's familiarity with his or her family, culture, and any other home items. Making use of cultural information of value to students can create a direct reason for the student to learn the second language.

Use of ESL Methods with Language Minority Students with Severe Disabilities

Presently, few special educators are utilizing English as a second language (ESL) methods in their classrooms. Even fewer teachers who teach language minority students with severe disabilities are making use of these methods. Yet, the few special education teachers who *are* using these ESL methods with language minority students who have severe disabilities are helping their students to learn English more effectively. This section looks at how teachers have used and modified ESL methods to suit the needs and capabilities of their language minority students with severe disabilities. Results of their efforts to use these methodologies are also described.

Total Physical Response

When TPR is used in ESL classrooms, teachers say a command in English and then demonstrate or gesture how to follow that command. The same technique can be used when working with language minority students with severe disabilities. However, it is important to realize that some students with severe disabilities may have physical difficulty in following the command (e.g., a command such as "Put your hand on the desk" may be difficult for a student with a physical disability to follow). Other students may simply show resistance to participating. Therefore, teachers utilizing the Total Physical Response approach with students with severe disabilities may need to physically guide or otherwise assist the students in performing the action associated with the command.

There are many examples of students successfully learning through TPR. The author has observed language minority students with severe disabilities in classrooms where they are actively learning using the Total Physical Response approach. In one case in particular, a Mexican national student with severe retardation has been learning English through TPR. A description of her experience follows, for it illustrates how TPR can be effective when working with students who have severe disabilities.

Juana is from Mexico and has recently arrived in northern California with her family, which has come to pick fruit in the Napa Valley. Juana is 14 years old. The language spoken at home is Spanish. Juana knows a few words and phrases in Spanish and is somewhat verbal in Spanish. Receptively, Juana can understand some commands given to her in Spanish. No formal tests have been given to Juana as of yet, but she was tested in Mexico where her I.Q. measured 20. She was given this test in Spanish.

For the first few days of school, Juana was scared and did not want to come to class. However, her parents want Juana to learn English, because they would like to remain in the United States and feel all their children will profit from English instruction.

By using the Total Physical Response approach, her teacher has made some initial progress. He started by teaching Juana functional commands relating to the classroom, such as "stand

up," "sit down," etc. Within a month Juana learned six commands. As the weeks went by, she felt happier about coming to school, because she was understanding more and more of the English words and commands she heard.

Juana's special education teacher continues to use TPR with Juana. He has also made some augmented devices such as computer disks in Spanish and English, which he lets Juana listen to after lunch or whenever she finishes her work and has some additional time to do something different. Juana loves working on the computer, because she loves touching the keyboard. She also enjoys the fact that the computer utilizes her first language.

Other evidence of TPR's effectiveness with language minority students with severe disabilities can be found in the results of several recent studies. For example, Durán's (1992) study concentrated upon several language minority students with severe disabilities who were unable to speak or receptively receive information in English. Teachers in the study used a variety of methods adapted from ESL classrooms. When teachers used Total Physical Response with these students, the students started to say more words in English. Even those students who were not verbal started to respond receptively when English commands were given by the teachers and paired with Total Physical Response gestures. By the end of six months, the minority students involved in the study continued to learn vocabulary in English. Teachers involved in the study were amazed to discover how effective the ESL methods were and reported that they would continue using the methods, including the TPR approach, with other minority children in their special education classes.

Durán and Shunk (1992) report similar beneficial results from using TPR. These researchers worked directly with a seventeen-year old Down Syndrome Vietnamese student whose first and only language was Vietnamese. Using TPR, Durán and Shunk were able to teach this student approximately fifty words and commands in five months time. In addition to using the TPR approach, Durán and Shunk also read several books about Vietnam in order to learn about the student's culture. They report that learning about their student's culture was extremely helpful in adding items from the student's culture to the various language lessons. Doing this, they note, greatly motivated the Vietnamese student to learn new words in English.

The Natural Approach

The Natural Approach (particularly when combined with the Total Physical Response approach) has also proven effective in teaching language minority students with severe disabilities. Take, for example, the experiences of a teacher who works in northern California with students who have severe disabilities. This teacher has two high school students from Asian backgrounds in her classroom. Both students have severe autism. They know only a few words in English but are fluent receptively and expressively in Chinese.

Using the Natural Approach and making use of cultural information of value to these two Asian students with

autism, the teacher has the students preparing foods that are typical in their families. Since the students are preparing foods they know and like, they have learned to verbally name each of the items needed to prepare the family dishes. The teacher asks each student, "What is this?" and she points to each food item on the table. The families of these youths are pleased that foods their children are familiar with are being used to help their sons/daughters learn how to answer questions concerning food.

In the first study of its nature, Durán is presently conducting a longitudinal study to determine if some English as a second language methods are more effective than others in teaching language to Latino students who have severe disabilities. Preliminary findings are indicating that the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response are helping the students learn their second language more effectively. Findings of this study will be published in 1994.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning, as it is used in ESL classrooms, may require some small modifications before it can be used effectively with language minority students with severe disabilities. Rather than pair or group students based upon their English proficiency and cultural background, teachers may need to consider the level at which students function, given their disabilities. For example, a higher-functioning student (who could be a person from a regular education class or a higher-functioning student from the same class) might be placed near a lower-functioning student, so that the higher-functioning student can help the lower-ability student understand the lesson. The higher-functioning student then acts as a tutor for the lower-functioning student. The higher-functioning student usually has more vocabulary and uses more complete sentences. Hearing this more fluent English is helpful to the lower-functioning student, who can begin to understand and, eventually, to speak more words in English. At the same time, the higher-functioning student gets many opportunities to practice his or her English, as well as to consolidate his or her understanding of the classroom lessons by sharing knowledge and insight with his or her partner.

It is important for the teacher to know the students and their ability levels before pairing or grouping students together. The author has seen this method work effectively when teachers were aware of each of their student's ability level in class. Furthermore, the author has seen cooperative learning work, because the students enjoyed assisting each other in the classroom and in the community.

Preview/Review Method

In this method, the teacher begins the lesson by giving students a few words of instruction in their first language or L1. These few words or sentences in L1 allow students to understand what the topic of the lesson will be. "Previewing" the lesson in this way allows students to use their prior knowledge to understand the lesson, which is then presented in English. When

this approach is used correctly, it becomes effective for teaching language minority students who have severe disabilities.

For example, Durán (1992) compared how quickly two groups of Latino students with severe disabilities performed a vocational task. One group received a few words in Spanish at the start of the lesson ("Previewing"); the remaining explanation was given to these students in English. The second group received instruction in English only. Results showed that the group who received the previewing words in Spanish performed their task of collating papers more quickly than did the group receiving English instruction only.

Parental Involvement: Another Important Consideration

In addition to making use of instructional practices commonly used in ESL classrooms, teachers working with language minority students with severe disabilities will find it extremely useful to involve parents in their children's education. Parents and the family must be given information on the instructional approaches being used in the classroom. Further, parents must be respected as team members in their child's educational program.

Giving information to parents about the instructional approaches being used in the classroom allows parents to understand each of the methods, which in turn allows them to further their child's learning by using the same techniques at home. Students with severe disabilities often are not able to learn information in one environment and transfer that learning to another environment. Thus, parents must be given instruction in their home or the classroom on a monthly basis, so that they can begin understanding what they need to do to help their children learn concepts faster. By visiting minority parents' homes, the teacher and other careproviders can also learn about each child's culture and family needs. This information can then be used by the teacher in designing lessons that incorporate cultural knowledge of value to each student.

Cooperating and collaborating with parents begins to build a trust between the parents and school professionals. Often, minority parents must develop that trust before they can allow teachers of other cultures and languages to help them with their children and youth. As the minority parents develop trust in the teacher and other careproviders, they will begin to share information that they feel is important in teaching their sons or daughters. This team member approach will also assist teachers, because the parents can become advocates of the methods that the teacher is trying to use with their son or daughter in school or in the community.

The author has effectively mobilized more than two hundred minority parents in the Southwest, so that they could learn communication, management, and other techniques useful in teaching language minority students with severe disabilities. Parents attended workshops and training sessions on Saturdays. Parents often brought their children to the sessions, so that they could be shown directly how to work with and teach their

children. All the workshops were conducted in Spanish, with teacher candidates at the university assisting the author in the instruction. As more and more parents were assisted, a long waiting list of parents who wanted to participate in the workshops developed.

Latino parents are also receiving direct intervention in San Mateo, California. Here, the Title VII educators at the County Office of Education bring in professionals once a month to help teach and train the parents. Parents are given child care services while they are participating in the training. The author has participated in training the Latino parents in San Mateo. When the parents were asked why they enjoyed coming once a month, they noted that: (a) people at the workshops spoke their language; (b) the parents felt that they were learning how to work with their son or daughter, because someone always demonstrated the appropriate techniques; and (c) they felt pleased to have the opportunity to share their sadnesses and joys with other parents.

Recommendations for Future Directions

Today, more than 30% of the population under age 18 are minorities ("Minorities," 1990). By the year 2000, the number of minority students attending our schools will have dramatically increased (Henry, 1990). Already we are experiencing a major influx of immigrants whose first language is not English. There will be a great need for teachers specifically trained to meet the needs of language minority students in our schools. Therefore, in order for language minority students with severe disabilities to receive the most appropriate education, the following recommendations are offered:

1. It is recommended that institutions of higher education commit to programs for helping to better train teachers to understand the best practices for teaching language minority students.

2. It is recommended that special education, bilingual education, and/or ESL departments create programs that bring together competencies of special education and English as a second language methods, in order to develop credential programs in bilingual/language development and special education.

3. It is recommended that some of the dual credentialing in bilingual/language development and special education bring together coursework for teacher candidates in: language acquisition theory, English as a second language methodology, bilingual education methods and curriculum, special education methods for teaching students with severe disabilities, and courses in assessment of special education students. Teacher candidates would additionally have to student teach in regular education (with emphasis upon English as a second language classrooms) and special education classrooms where students with severe disabilities would be enrolled.

4. It is recommended that federal monies be made available to institutions of higher education through their teacher preparation departments, in order to find better and more creative means of credentialing teacher candidates who will be teaching language minority students.

5. It is recommended that federal monies be set aside for minority researchers to continue to investigate best practices in teaching language minority students.

6. It is recommended that national conferences (such as those held by The Association for Persons with Severe Disabilities, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) call for papers that also include best practices and other research useful in teaching language minority students with severe disabilities.

7. It is recommended that more minority faculty-researchers and practitioners who work directly with language minority students or who are conducting research with minority students be encouraged to present at national conferences. Since there are so few minority faculty found at institutions of higher education, little effort is made to seek out these professionals. Yet these professionals usually have a great deal of information to share with the audience and other service providers.

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